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ABSTRACT

A 1960 study found that one-teacher schools numbered 24,000; were outmoded, poorly financed, and of inferior construction; and had inadequately prepared teachers. In the early 1980s, a study of these schools found that their facilities were updated, most teachers were college trained and state certified, and the students performed well at school and in later grades. However, there were only 837 of them left. During the 1995-96 school year, a survey found that 379 one-teacher public elementary schools were operating in rural, often remote, areas in 28 states. Data on teachers, students, community, class enrollments, buildings, and districts are given, as are perceived strengths and weaknesses of one-teacher schools. These schools were amply staffed with qualified, experienced teachers. The students did well and created few disciplinary problems. Community support was high and teachers respected local values. The buildings were old but in good repair, had adequate facilities, and remained a center for community activities. Students were not exposed to grading traumas, school discipline problems, and overcrowding evident in larger schools. Includes a table showing number of one-teacher schools by state in 1958-59, 1984, 1996, and a map showing distribution of one-teacher schools in 1996. (TD)

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ED 402 122

One-Teacher Public Elementary Schools

in America

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1996 Study

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Introduction

There is something about the past and thinking about schooling that just seems right—like motherhood, apple pie and family picnics. Many citizens, especially educators today haven't attended small rural schools but visions of life in a small community and attending a little school do not seem so strange or unwanted. As commented by James Romney (Journey from Ignorant Ridge 1976) "But that humble little school had a dignity of a fixed and far off purpose . . . It was life preparing wistfully for the future."

Most educators are probably aware that small schools and especially one-teacher rural schools were a major element in the fabric of American History. For more than two hundred years these one-room schools have served the educational needs of a sizable portion of the youth of America. It has not been possible to determine how many of these schools were in service during the 1800's but at the turn of the century the best estimates place the number of these schools at well over 200,000. In 1917 there were 196,000 operational one-teacher schools in the U.S. These schools were typically in rural agricultural states, but could be found in all states to some extent.

Sadly, the number of these schools took a serious decline from World War I to 1960 when the numbers had dropped to approximately 24,000. The National Education Association who reported on these schools in 1960 indicated that they were outmodeled, poorly financed, of inferior construction and had inadequately prepared teachers. this was the last major study completed on these schools until the early 1980's. At this time Muse and Smith from Brigham Young University sought to restudy these schools and to determine how many were left in operation and if the conditions discussed by the NEA in 1960 still existed.

The researchers found that these schools had changed in a remarkable fashion. The facilities were updated and most of the schools had indoor plumbing,

modern heating systems and ample school supplies. In addition the majority of teachers were college trained and state certified and the students performed well at school and in later grades. In fact, Muse found in a later study of one-room school students in high school that their grades placed them in the top 1/2 of all students. In addition the drop out rate of these students in secondary school was practically non-existent. (A 1985 study of the performance of students from small country elementary schools when they attend high school - ERIC Document ED 261 843.)

Unfortunately, the 1984 study found that only 837 of these schools remained in operation (see Table One). Of this number the state of Nebraska had 385 schools followed by Montana (99) and South Dakota (87). Seventeen states were found to have no one-teacher schools in existence and six states had only one school remaining.

1996 Study of One-Teacher Schools

The purpose of this study was to accumulate current information and teacher perceptions relating to one-teacher schools. The study documents the current number of these schools and their locations. By use of a survey teachers in these schools reported on current conditions regarding students, instruction, curriculum, buildings, etc. The results of this study were compared and contrasted to the earlier 1984 study.

This study was delimited to operating, rural public, one-room and one-teacher schools in the United States during the 1995-1996 school year. The schools studied included only those with students enrolled in at least one grade between kindergarten and grade eight. Small rural high schools were not considered.

Several steps were required to collect the necessary data for this study. Beginning with the Market Data Retrievals' (MDR) commercially available data base, the total numbers of possible one teacher schools, their locations and employed

teachers were obtained. The commercial data base was delimited by school size, one teacher, k-8, public and rural schools. This data base was used as a basis and beginning point for the search for location and total number of schools. Potential schools were verified through contact with various state governmental agencies knowledgeable about these schools. Where information was scant or lacking, State Departments of Education were contacted and their reporting utilized. The listing of one-teacher schools was further augmented by information from the 1993-94 common core of data survey provided by the National Data Survey located in Washington DC. The National Rural Education Association, utilizing the Regional Service Centers, agreed to assist this study by providing contact names in various states who had information about locations of one-teacher schools. Once the location information was obtained, information was gathered from individual teachers employed by the identified schools/districts.

The instrument used to collect data was a questionnaire prepared for teachers of one-room schools. This questionnaire consists of questions with simple check-off answers and questions requiring short written responses. An accompanying letter of introduction and explanation was sent with each questionnaire along with a stamped return envelope. In addition, a postage paid return post card was sent so those schools, no longer qualifying as one-teacher schools, could send notification of that fact. Every non-responsive schools (except those few schools, mainly in Alaska, without telephones) were contacted by telephone. This latter effort requires numerous hours and substantial phone bills.

These sources indicated, initially, that 470 one-teacher schools were operative in 1996. Not all school sites were in operation when contacted. It became apparent that schools opened and closed from year to year depending on economic, population or social conditions. Schools sometimes, but rarely, closed during a

school year. These conditions made data from most individual sources unreliable if used exclusively.

When the initial number of 470 schools, with addresses, had been compiled, the questionnaire was mailed to all of the schools. After receiving either a completed questionnaire, the non-qualifying return card or from information gathered via the telephone, a more accurate number of 379 operating one-teacher schools was obtained.

Report of Data Obtained from Surveys

Teachers

Teachers in one-teacher schools in 1996 were typically female, married, in the age group of 40 to 49 years old and had spouses that were engaged in agriculture. These teachers typically had 10-14 years of teaching experience with 3 to 5 years of experience in their present one-teacher school and expected to teach in the same assignment in the upcoming year. As an average, they held a bachelor's degree and had received at least 15 hours of credit past the bachelors level. Most had grown up or lived the greater part of their lives in communities of less than 500 people or in open country.

Almost half of the responding teachers were purchasing their own home with about one-third living in school board provided teacherages. Twenty-eight percent of the teachers lived in the community and drove less than eight miles to get to school from home. Almost 70 percent travel less than one mile to arrive at school. The average teacher lived as close as 25 miles from the high school and as far as 320 miles from their closest parent. They had to drive about 50 miles to go shopping. The one constant in teaching in one-teacher schools over the past 200 or more years has not changed. These teacher live in remote or isolated areas.

The teachers' work day averaged over nine hours. Except for special education services, more than 50 percent of the teachers had to include within their

teaching performance remedial reading, testing of students, purchasing supplies, PE activities, art and music instruction without district or service center support. This work load would be considered excessive for the urban teacher. Out of necessity many of the teachers performed custodial duties, drove busses, prepared lunches, maintained the buildings and ground and performed secretarial functions; usually without additional pay.

The factor which caused these teachers the greatest concern was the distance required to attend a university. Shopping was also a concern and, for those who were single, dating was very difficult.

Students

Most (91 percent) one-teacher schools served just a few families (1 to 10 total). Almost a third of the schools had students that came from less than four families. The typical family had to send their student just over 7 miles, one-way, to go to school. The overwhelming majority of students were white (86 percent) although the percentage of white students has decreased slightly since 1984. Teachers rated their students high to average achievers with just a small percentage of students as low achievers.

The graduates of one-teachers schools were reported to go on to be good students in high school. Almost half of the teachers reported their students became high school honor students with many graduating with post high school degrees. This information parallels that found in the Muse study of the performance of these students in high school.

Community

A majority of the teachers (70 percent) rated their community support to be high while little or no support accounted for only five percent. Teacher satisfaction is directly correlated to the level of community support. Teachers supported their view with specific examples of community involvement such as; attendance and

participation at school events and activities, volunteer work and willingness to assist with school funding.

Class Enrollments

The size of one-teacher schools over the last five years has declined from 9.9 students to the present level of 9.4. This appears to be a manageable level of students but there is increasing concern from teachers that declining enrollments will cause additional school closures in the near future.

Buildings

The typical one-teacher school is still made of wood, is 65 years old, has indoor bathroom facilities, adequate gas heating and an adequate play area for the children. Many teachers were concerned with the building's small size, lack of storage and outdated curricular materials. The community made use of about half of the total number of school building for non-school related activities. The little schools still remained a focal center of most of the communities.

Districts

Nearly half of the one-teacher schools surveyed were the only school in their districts. The other half were comprised mostly of just one middle or junior high school and one high school besides the elementary school(s). The majority of responding teachers felt that they had good to adequate support from their district offices. Many praised their administrators and a few of the teachers were very happy to be some distance away from the politics of the district office.

Strengths of Teaching in Small Schools

Teachers rated their school strong because of many factors. They felt that individualized instruction, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, one on one instruction, lack of discipline problems, no violence or drug problems and caring teachers made the one-teacher school unique, valuable and strong.

Weaknesses of Teaching in Small Schools

Teachers also recognized problem areas encountered in their small schools. Because of the small enrollment, activities like team sports and peer social interactions were difficult or impossible. Outdated materials, little professional association for the teacher, lack of preparation time, difficulty in planning lessons for so many grade levels and isolation were listed often by the teachers as weaknesses of one-teacher schools.

Uniqueness

Many things were cited as being unique to the one-teacher schools. Among them were: multi-generational student attendance, student high performance safe environment for students, community support, students doing well when they go to high school, caring environment and the school having a historical background.

Half of these schools have at least a part-time aide to assist the teacher but the ultimate responsibility for the success of the school rests on the individual teachers. The most often cited reasons for the school still being open were fierce community loyalty and isolated location. Community pressure to keep the schools open was indicated by the majority of the responding teachers as a major reason for the continuation of these schools.

Conclusion

The existing one-teacher schools have been found to be amply staffed with qualified teachers who have had years of experience. The students do well in school and create few disciplinary problems. Community support is high and classrooms are taught by teachers who respect local values and objectives. The school buildings, while old, are in good repair and have adequate facilities. The little schools remain as a focal center for many community activities.

The drop in the number of operating one-teacher schools from 1984 through 1996 was a surprise and somewhat of a disquieting statistic. The loss of these schools is on-going and the drop is dramatic. It is expected that this reduction will continue until at some point the figure stabilizes. The ultimate number will most likely

location, involve considerations of school bus travel restrictions and a strong desire of the parents to keep the school and students intact.

This study indicates that the remaining schools are serving a useful purpose. The students are not exposed to the grading traumas, school discipline problems, over crowding, etc. evident so often in larger schools. Closing these schools with the idea in mind that a setting with a bigger school might be more beneficial to these students should be looked at carefully.

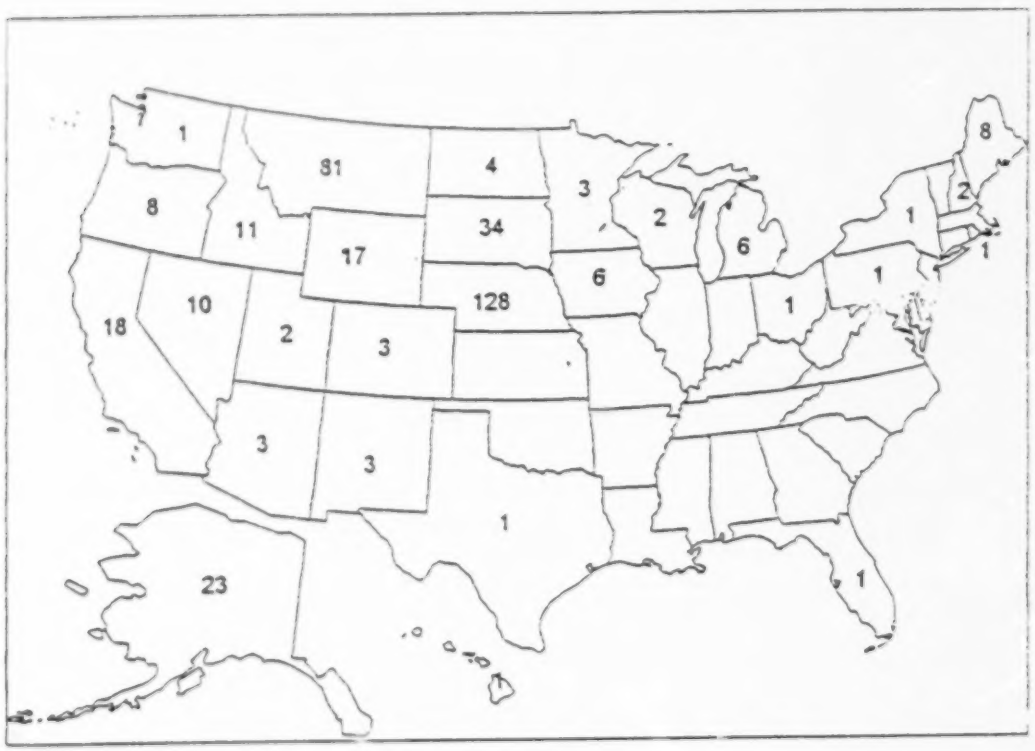
It seems paradoxical that cities have begun attempts to create small schools within-a-school, to introduce multigrade classes, and small cohort groups in order to develop a sense of community and belonging when on the other hand truly small schools are being closed. Small one-teacher schools must be preserved if nothing more than to serve as show cases and examples of what can happen when teacher and student develop a bond and a shared purpose that agrees with and supplements the parents and community values and interests. All of us know from experience that it is easier to communicate, teach, develop trust, model, and display emotion and affections where there is close and prolonged contact with teacher and child. It is simply more reassurable and defensible to have smaller schools and better classroom relationships. The small school is a wonderful place for quality education and a sense of community to occur. The one-teacher school exists for the right reasons and it is hoped by the author of this study that they will remain an important part of the landscape of this country.

Table 1
Number of One-Teacher Schools
by State, 1958-59, 1984, 1996

State	1958-59 (1)	1984 (2)	1996 (3)	State	1958-59 (1)	1984 (2)	1996 (3)
Alaska	41	28	23	Montana	820	99	81
Alabama	278	0	0	Nebraska	2,812	385	128
Arizona	50	12	3	Nevada	41	12	10
California	300	41	18	New Hampshire	45	7	2
Colorado	203	3	3	New Jersey	2	0	0
Delaware	21	0	0	New Mexico	43	3	3
Florida	27	1	1	New York	79	3	1
Georgia	16	0	0	North Dakota	2,075	25	4
Hawaii	0	0	1	Ohio	23	2	1
Idaho	70	23	11	Oklahoma	350	0	0
Illinois	176	1	0	Oregon	86	15	8
Indiana	74	0	0	Pennsylvania	274	0	1
Iowa	1,117	0	6	Rhode Island	1	0	1
Kansas	1,007	1	0	South Carolina	14	0	0
Kentucky	1,343	1	0	South Dakota	2,338	87	34
Louisiana	38	0	0	Tennessee	568	0	0
Maine	230	13	8	Texas	62	4	1
Maryland	35	1	0	Utah	19	3	2
Massachusetts	14	0	0	Vermont	208	9	0
Michigan	1,291	17	6	Washington	81	8	1
Minnesota	1.433	0	3	West Virginia	1.032	2	0
Mississippi	426	1	0	Wisconsin	2,415	0	2
Missouri	1,357	0	0	Wyoming	287	31	17
Totals					**23,695**	**837**	**379**

Source - (1) 1958-59 Number of Schools (NEA, 1960), (2) 1984 Number of Schools (Muse, 1984), (3) 1996 Number of Schools (Research study by the authors)

Table 2
Distribution of One-Teacher Schools in the United States in 1996



The 1996 distribution of one-teacher schools in the United States. Source - 1996 Study